PATTERNS OF POWER

The Demand That It Make Sense

A statement of method

Why a mechanics is not a theory; what has to be reconstructed before a decision becomes legible; why the same shapes keep recurring without anything moving them; and what this way of looking cannot see

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with Claude (Anthropic)

Held as tested, not revealed.

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Preface

This is not an argument about history. It is an account of how the rest of this collection was made, written down because the method is easy to mistake for something it is not, and the mistake changes what the studies appear to be claiming.

They are not claiming to have found a law. They are not claiming that a given arrangement had to turn out as it did, or that the men in it were carried along by forces they did not choose, or that knowing the position tells you the outcome. Several readers have taken them that way, and one can see why: a collection of cases that keep producing the same shapes looks like a collection assembled to demonstrate that the shapes are real.

The order of operations was the other way round. The shapes came first, unbidden and unwelcome, and the project is an attempt to find out whether they were there or whether the person seeing them was manufacturing them. That is a different enterprise from proving a theory, it needs a different discipline, and it makes weaker claims — deliberately, and at every point.

What follows sets out the premise it starts from, what that premise commits you to, the four things you have to rebuild before any decision becomes intelligible, the two stopping rules that masquerade as explanations, why the recurrence needs no mover, and — at more length than is comfortable — what this way of looking is structurally unable to see.

I

The premise, and what it commits you to

The starting point is a single flat proposition and it is not an argument. **Nobody in the record is special or divine. They are all homo sapiens, making decisions.**

That is a premise, not a finding. It cannot be demonstrated, and a person who believes that providence moves in history, or that some peoples are constituted differently from others, or that certain individuals were of a different order from the rest of us, holds a coherent position that this one simply declines. It is stated here as what it is: a working commitment, adopted because of what it makes possible rather than because it has been proved.

What it makes possible is a demand, and the demand is the whole method.

If everyone in the record was an ordinary human being making decisions, then every decision in the record should in principle be legible — reconstructible as something a person in that position, wanting what he wanted, seeing what he could see, with what he had to hand, might reasonably have done. Not admirable. Not correct. Legible.

And the demand has a sharp edge, which is where its usefulness lies. If a decision cannot be made legible, **that is a failure of the explanation, not a fact about the person.** It means the reconstruction is incomplete — something has been missed about what he could see, or what he wanted, or what he feared, or what he had. The response is to go back for it, not to conclude that he was mad, or monstrous, or a genius, or an instrument of something larger.

Held that way, the premise stops being a metaphysical opinion and becomes a work rule: *keep going until it makes sense.* Almost everything else in this collection follows from that one instruction being taken seriously.

II

Pattern recognition is an instrument, and instruments have error rates

The honest origin of this project is not a hypothesis. It is a habit of noticing that similar shapes keep appearing in situations that have nothing to do with one another, which is a disposition rather than an achievement and which some people have and others do not.

That disposition is a capacity and a hazard in the same instrument, and the two cannot be separated, because pattern recognition does not come with a signal telling you which of its outputs are real. It fires on genuine regularities and on noise identically and with the same confidence. Every conspiracy theory in the world is produced by the same faculty that produces every genuine discovery of a hidden regularity, and from the inside they feel the same.

Which means that anyone whose method begins in pattern recognition is obliged to build the error-correction externally, because it is not going to arrive from within.

That is what the disciplines of this collection are for, and it is worth saying plainly that they are not scholarly manners. **Verify every load-bearing quotation, date and figure before writing rather than after.** *Because the pattern will otherwise supply the fact.* **Give contested figures as ranges.** *Because a single number is what a pattern wants and a range is what the evidence supports.* **State the strongest counter-position at full strength, from the people who actually make it.** *Because a pattern is most dangerous where nothing has been*

allowed to contradict it. **If deleting the framework's own term leaves the sentence still telling the reader what happened, the term earned its place; if the term was the content, the fact is missing.** *Because the vocabulary of a pattern will happily stand in for evidence and read as though it were evidence.*

Each of those is a specific countermeasure against a specific way the instrument fails. Taken together they are the reason the project can be offered as something other than a very long exercise in seeing faces in clouds — and they are the reason it periodically has to reverse its own findings in public, as it did on the identity attack in one study, corrected by the eleventh module of the same study.

III

A mechanics is not a theory

Here is the distinction that most needs stating, because the collection is repeatedly read as making a stronger claim than it makes.

A theory predicts. It says: given these conditions, this will follow. It is tested by its predictions and it is falsified when they fail. To do that work it has to hold that the conditions *determine* the outcome, at least probabilistically and at least in the aggregate.

A mechanics explains. It says: here is the machinery a decision ran through — what the person could see, what he was trying to get, what it would have cost him, what he had available. It is tested by whether the reconstruction is faithful to the evidence and whether it makes the decision intelligible. It does not have to hold that the conditions determined anything, because it is not in the business of saying what will happen. It is in the business of saying what was on the table.

This collection is doing the second thing, and the difference is not a hedge. It is the correct strength of claim for what is actually being established.

Consider what the evidence keeps producing. Two ministers in one council in the same year, facing the same question — adopt the French civil code wholesale, or codify Islamic jurisprudence in European form. One argues each way; one wins; the empire gets the second answer. Egypt, at the same moment, gets the first. Same problem, same decade, same menu, opposite selections, and both selections were on the menu.

Or: the same island, the same throne, the same conquering nation, two hundred and seventy years apart. One state rents

the chair and leaves the king on it. The other abolishes it. And the reason is not that the second was more ruthless — it is that by then the chair's value had come from a Chinese licence that had stopped being worth anything.

A theory that predicted the choice would be falsified by cases like these. **A mechanics that reconstructs the shortlist is confirmed by them**, because in every instance the branch actually taken was one of the small number that were available, and the one not taken was the other.

That is the load the framework is built to carry. Not what a man will do. What was in front of him, and what each item would have cost.

IV

The four reconstructions

To make a decision legible you have to rebuild four things, and each has a characteristic way of going wrong.

What was visible

Not what was true — what was *in his field*. A ruler in 1830 could not consult a body of comparative evidence that did not yet exist, could not know how an experiment running elsewhere would turn out, and in most cases could not know things that are now the first paragraph of any account of his reign.

The failure mode here is the one nobody escapes entirely: we know how it ended and he did not. Every reconstruction has to be done with a fact deliberately set aside, and the fact keeps getting picked back up. The discipline is to establish, positively and from sources, what information had actually reached the room — which despatches, which reports, which precedents — rather than assuming that what was knowable was known.

And the field is not evenly distributed. The instruments of comparative vision are expensive and are held at the top, which is why a peasant and a minister in the same country in the same year are not operating on the same map at all.

What was valued

The benefit side, and it has to be reconstructed *as they held it*, not as we would.

This is where anachronism does its damage, and it damages in both directions. It is as much an error to assume that a nineteenth-century official was indifferent to the suffering he

caused as to assume he weighted it as we would; the evidence usually shows something specific and strange — that he weighted the good opinion of a foreign chancellery very heavily and the mortality of a distant province very lightly, and that both weightings are visible in what he spent money on.

Which is the tool: **what an order pays for when it does not have to is the most reliable statement of what it values.** Not what it says. What it buys. A government that promotes a provincial shrine beyond the rank its own governor requested, and minutes that it is doing so because the population's loyalty is in doubt, has told you more about its valuation than any despatch.

What was credible

The cost side, and the word is doing precise work.

A cost is only a cost if the person believes it will be exacted. A threat that will not be carried out is not a cost, and a punishment that has never been seen is worth a fraction of one that has. This is why the same policy in two different hands prices differently: the man who has already demonstrated that he will do the thing does not have to do it again.

The failure mode is moralism — treating a cost as though its weight were fixed by how bad it is rather than by how likely and how visible. A great atrocity that nobody expects to be repeated may deter less than a small penalty that is enforced every week. And credibility can be spent: an order that has issued a threat and not carried it out has purchased something and paid for it in the only currency it has.

What was to hand

The materials. The officials he actually had rather than the ones the design assumed, the money he could actually

raise, the beliefs his population would actually accept, the machinery the previous order left standing and still running.

The failure mode is treating the deviation from a model as incompetence. It almost never is. When an imported institution comes out more centralised than the original, the useful question is what was absent that would have decentralised it. When a whole component is quietly dropped, the question is what it would have cost and who would have paid. **The difference between what was copied and what was built is not a measure of how far he fell short. It is a description of what he had.**

V

The two stopping rules that are not explanations

Two moves terminate inquiry while wearing the clothes of a conclusion, and they are structurally the same move.

The monster. He did it because he was evil. This is not an explanation; it is a decision to stop looking, and it is available for any act whatever. It also happens to be unfalsifiable, which is a warning sign in itself.

The inevitable. It had to happen; the forces were in motion; the arrangement was doomed. Also not an explanation, also a decision to stop looking, and available for any outcome that in fact occurred.

They look opposite — one puts everything on a person, the other takes everything off him — but they do identical work. **Both remove a human being from the field of things that can be reconstructed.** The first makes him a different kind of creature; the second makes him a conduit. Either way there is nothing left to explain, and the inquiry closes at the exact point where it was about to become useful.

The premise in Part I is what forecloses both. If nobody is special or divine, then the monster is a human being whose reasoning has not yet been reconstructed, and the inevitable is a sequence of decisions whose alternatives have not yet been listed. In both cases the correct response is the same, and it is the work rule: go back and find what was missed.

The dividend from refusing both is concrete and it shows up all over this collection. The most useful findings in it are the ones that came from insisting on legibility in a place where a moral verdict was more readily available — a state that manufactured a class its doctrine required and did not find; a levy

preserved for twenty-four years because abolishing it would have cost a fight with the class the conqueror had bought; an official telling a parliament, truthfully, that a population could not be enfranchised because of institutions his own government had deliberately preserved. None of those is visible from behind either stopping rule.

VI

Legibility is not pardon

The obvious objection to everything above is that it excuses, and it has to be met rather than waved away, because the danger is real and the vocabulary invites it.

Our moral and our explanatory languages overlap at exactly the wrong word. To say that an act is *understandable* is ambiguous between "I can reconstruct the reasoning" and "I find it forgivable," and the ambiguity is not accidental — in ordinary life we do usually excuse things by explaining them, and the phrase *he had his reasons* is normally a plea in mitigation.

The separation has to be made deliberately and then held.

An explanation is a reconstruction of a reasoning process. It answers: what did this person think he was doing, given what he could see, wanted, feared and had.

A judgement is an assessment of an act and its consequences. It answers: what was done, to whom, and at what cost.

These are independent operations on the same object and both can be run to completion without either touching the other. A decision can be entirely legible and entirely indefensible, and the great majority of the decisions in this collection are exactly that. Reconstructing why a governor thought it reasonable to convert a village's common forest into state property and sell its best ground to nobles and outside merchants does not make it less of a theft; it tells you how thefts of that kind are arranged, which is the only thing that could ever help anyone recognise the next one.

The formula the collection uses is *legibility is not pardon*, and it earns its place by being repeated at exactly the moments when the reconstruction is going well, because that is when the slide happens.

There is also a converse worth stating, since it is the less obvious half. **Refusing to explain is not a moral achievement.** An account that stops at *monstrous* has declined to produce the one thing that might be of use later, and has done so in a way that flatters everyone reading it, since a monster is by definition not us. The reconstruction is less comfortable precisely because it establishes that ordinary people in that position, wanting ordinary things, did that — which is the finding, and the reason it is worth having.

VII

Why the same shapes recur, without anything moving them

If the method is right, the recurrence of similar arrangements across unconnected times and places needs an explanation that does not smuggle in a mover. There are three, and all of them are mundane.

The problems repeat. Anyone holding power over a territory needs revenue, needs armed men, needs the revenue to arrive without the armed men having to be everywhere, and needs the people paying it not to spend all their time working out how to stop. Those requirements are not culturally specific; they follow from the arithmetic of holding ground with a finite number of people. A ruler in one century and a ruler in another are not thinking alike. They are answering the same question.

There are only a few good answers. Given a problem of that shape, the number of arrangements that actually work is small — not because of any law, but because most possible arrangements are eliminated by cost, by arithmetic, or by the fact that they have been tried and did not hold. A position with three viable solutions will produce those three solutions repeatedly, and the repetition looks like a pattern in history when it is a pattern in the problem.

And people watch each other. This is the part that gets mistaken for a spirit of the age. Rulers observe what other rulers have done and copy what appears to have worked, and the apparatus by which they do it is not mysterious — embassies, missions, hired advisers, translated reports, students sent abroad, congresses. When an arrangement appears in six countries in twenty years, the useful question is not what force carried it but

who went to look, what it cost them to look, and which of them wrote the brief that was adopted.

Put the three together and the recurrence is fully accounted for with nothing left over. No cycle, no dialectic, no hidden hand, no destination. **Same problem, few workable answers, and everyone can see what worked elsewhere.**

That also explains why history rhymes rather than repeats. The problem recurs, so the shortlist recurs; but which item gets selected depends on the four reconstructions in Part IV, which differ every time — and on the fact that some of the men choosing were better at it than others.

VIII

What this way of looking cannot see

An account of a method is worth nothing without an account of its blind spots, and this one has four that are structural rather than remediable.

The decisions that were not taken leave no trace at all. Every case in this collection is a case where somebody chose to act. There is no despatch, no treaty, no casualty return and no budget line generated by a ruler who looked at a territory, ran the same arithmetic, concluded it was not worth it, and did something else. Which means the shortlists reconstructed here are reconstructed entirely from cases in which an item was ordered — and are therefore conditioned on somebody having ordered something. The framework's tendencies are, strictly, tendencies among ventures that were attempted. That is narrower than it looks and the collection should say so more often than it does.

The archive selects for orders that wrote things down, which is not the same as orders that succeeded. The obvious version of this bias — winners leave records — is real but secondary. The sharper version is that *auditable* orders leave records. The Mongol empire was enormously successful and is seen mostly through the eyes of the people it conquered; the Soviet Union failed comprehensively and left an archive dense enough that a study can be built out of its own census returns and its own charge sheets. So the collection is systematically better at reading orders that were legible to themselves, and systematically worse at the ones the framework would classify as loosely structured — which is precisely the branch where its evidence is thinnest and its confidence should be lowest.

Confirmation is very cheap and disconfirmation is expensive. A framework this flexible can accommodate almost any case, and accommodation feels like success. The only real defences are the ones named in Part II, plus a specific habit: to state in advance what would break a finding, and to say so in writing before the research is done. The collection does this now in its seed documents and did not always.

And the reconstruction of what someone valued is the softest of the four. What was visible can be established from sources. What was to hand can be inventoried. Credibility can be checked against what had actually been enforced. But what a person wanted is inferred largely from what he did, which makes the reasoning circular unless it is disciplined by the revealed-preference test — what did he pay for when he did not have to — and that test is only available where the spending is recorded. Where it is not, the account is weaker than it will sound.

IX

Held as tested

There is a reason this collection ends every document with the same phrase, and it is not decoration.

The distinction it draws elsewhere — between a doctrine distilled upward from tested experience and one deduced downward from a first principle, between the kind of claim that can be debugged and the kind that can only be defended — applies to the framework itself, and it applies first. A lens that cannot be put down has stopped being a lens.

Which is why the claim is pitched where it is. Not a law. Not a theory of history. A description of the machinery a decision runs through, assembled from cases, held as the best available generalisation from those cases, and revisable by the next one. When a case contradicts it, the case wins — which has already happened often enough that the pattern of reversals is itself part of the record: a finding about withheld formation overturned by a later module of the same study; an expectation about manufactured nations discarded when the scholarship went the other way; a proposed revision about the cost of promises corrected to a claim about revisability instead.

And the failure condition is easy to state and worth keeping visible. **The moment the framework is doing the work that the evidence should be doing, the instrument has failed.** When a sentence is carried by its vocabulary rather than by a fact, the fact is missing. When a case fits too easily, it has probably not been tested. And when the pattern is more compelling than the record it was drawn from, the person seeing it has stopped looking at anything.

None of this is aimed at a destination. There is no argument here that things are getting better or worse, no claim that anything had to happen, and no remedy on offer. Only the working

conviction that everyone in the record was an ordinary human being deciding under constraint, and that if a decision does not yet make sense, the fault is in the account and not in the man — together with the discipline required to stop that conviction from becoming the kind of thing it exists to identify.

That is the whole of it. Set out the arithmetic. Leave the sum to the reader.